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ABSTRACT

Minority group students are disproportionately represented in special education programs and have alarmingly high dropout rates. In rural Louisiana, special educators must cope with teaching a population that is poor, ethnically diverse, and somewhat isolated from mainstream America. An assessment instrument designed to identify training needs of rural special educators of minority children was completed by 101 special education teachers and administrators in rural Louisiana parishes. Using a 4-point Likert-type scale, respondents rated the quality of their preservice training in 18 areas and the importance of teacher competency in 20 areas. Responses overwhelmingly indicated that specialized teacher training is vital for educating and retaining minority students. Respondents believed that effective teacher training should address minority learning styles, linguistic and communication variations, behavioral characteristics, value differences, parent involvement, and the impact of poverty on academic performance. Additionally, the low ranking by respondents of some needs (such as skills in working with minority communities) suggests the need to expand the knowledge base and experiences of these special educators. This paper contains 38 references, the needs assessment instrument, and a table of results. (SV)

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Abstract

This paper reports the results of an assessment instrument designed to identify training needs of special educators in rural Louisiana who teach minority children. For a variety of reasons, including inaccurate perceptions, stereotypes, and unfamiliarity regarding cultural, historical, and environmental experiences of ethnic groups, minority students are more likely than their white counterparts to be placed in special education. As a result, special educators are faced with problems associated with providing appropriate instruction. A statewide needs assessment was conducted to investigate the training needs of special education teachers who serve culturally and linguistically diverse populations. Based on participant responses, results indicated that Louisiana teachers share concerns with educators who serve rural minority students nationwide. Respondents overwhelmingly suggested that specialized preservice training that emphasizes specific issues such as learning styles, community and family values, and communication patterns may be necessary to ensure effective education and enhance the retention of minority students. Additionally, failure to rank some needs more favorably appears to indicate an existing need to expand the knowledge base and experiences of these special educators, and presumably other special educators, in order to provide the most appropriate education to all students.

Special Education Training to Prevent Minority School Dropouts in Rural Areas

A growing consensus regarding the importance of meeting the needs of exceptional children from culturally and/or linguistically diverse backgrounds has prompted philosophical and programmatic changes in special education. One indication of this widespread change is the fact that textbooks in preservice teacher training programs increasingly devote content to multicultural issues pertaining to assessment, curriculum, instruction, and pedagogical philosophy. Accreditation standards are being developed to promote multicultural teacher training (e.g., American Association for Colleges of Teacher Education, the National College Accreditation of Teacher Education). Accordingly, teacher training programs have begun to present multicultural issues and concerns in all facets of study (Anderson, Reiff, & McCray, 1988). However, in spite of some laudable efforts in the area, meeting the needs of minority students with educational handicaps will be extraordinarily difficult, if not nearly impossible, unless all preservice programs systematically assess and address multicultural training competencies (Rodriguez, 1982).

Research has consistently underscored several fundamental issues unique to the education of exceptional children from pluralistic backgrounds. Evidence abounds concerning the overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs (Chinn & Hughes, 1987; Reschly, 1988). Likewise, the underrepresentation of minority groups in programs for the gifted and talented requires considerable attention (DBS Corporation, 1987). Discriminatory assessment and placement practices have been redressed by the courts which have forced school systems to meet the letter, if not the spirit, of constitutional guarantees (c.f., Diana v. California State Board of Education, 1970; Larry P. v. Riles, 1979; Mattie T. v. Holloday, 1977). A concomitant issue revolves around language differences, especially in approaches to nonstandard English speaking students and bilingual speaking students (Collier & Hoover, 1988; Taylor, 1986). Finally, the decline in the number of minority group teachers and the concurrent increase in the number of ethnically diverse school children present an expanding obstacle to promoting multicultural education in the United States (Cole, 1986; Dupre, 1986; Franklin, 1987; Haberman, 1988; Kauchak, 1984; Plisko & Stern, 1985; Witty, 1984; Yates, 1986).

The historical inability of the special educational system to meet the needs of students from multicultural backgrounds has resulted in a number of repercussions, one of the most significant being an alarmingly high dropout rate. Research has consistently indicated that the attrition rate among students with mild/moderate disabilities is much higher than their nondisabled peers (Marrs, 1984). As minority students account for up to 71% of the mild/moderate population in some state school systems, little doubt can exist that problems with the assessment, evaluation, and placement processes contribute to the inadequacy of services provided to these students. Such shortcomings are largely systemic in nature, and beyond the power of individual teachers to ameliorate. Nevertheless, increased sensitivity of special education teachers to issues confronting students from multicultural backgrounds can lead to more effective programming and support retention of these students in spite of the inadequacies in the assessment process.

One possible approach for improving the quality of education to culturally diverse handicapped students hinges on modifying the content in special education teacher training programs. Indeed, some authorities propose that curricular revision is a necessary first step to help future teachers understand the unique challenges of providing truly appropriate education for these students (Baca, 1980; Cunningham, Cunningham, & O'Connell, 1986; Helge, 1983; Poplin & Wright, 1983; Rodriguez, 1982). Marrs (1984) has contended that the development of a new training curricula to be used in the preparation of rural special education teachers would alleviate the high attrition rate of teachers while enhancing the success of the rural handicapped population. Similarly, the development of multicultural training curricula might be a step toward reducing the high dropout rate of culturally diverse students and concomitantly the high attrition rate of both minority and non-minority special education teachers.

Curricular revision begins with the evaluation of the current training program. A broad programmatic needs assessment to identify multicultural training competencies can act as the centerpiece for such evaluation. It is essential that each training program engage in this process since multicultural issues vary widely from one program and one region to another. For example, a preservice training program in south Louisiana has identified a need to deal with a unique confluence of multicultural factors (Anderson et al., 1988). The population in Louisiana consists primarily of families who are considerably poor, ethnically diverse, and reside in rural communities (64%). Further, the watery topography not only fosters industry and occupations somewhat outside the mainstream American economy, but has led to some extremely isolated and insular communities.

Finally, in a state where the separation of church and state has not been realized with the same clarity as in the rest of the country, religion continues to supply a pervasive influence to attitudes, life-styles, and state politics. The multicultural training needs of special education teachers in south Louisiana are not likely to be found in any standard manual.

The purpose of the present study is to report the results of a needs assessment instrument identifying training needs of special educators in rural Louisiana who teach minority children. The needs identified provide a context for designing effective preservice and inservice training to help teachers meet the needs of disabled minority students in rural areas. If special education teachers are to cope with the demands of educating disabled students from diverse backgrounds, they must develop skills that correspond with the particular needs of the population being served. This correspondence is the essential foundation for preventing minority special education dropouts in rural areas. The needs identified in the present assessment not only indicate the demands in a specific teaching environment but can also serve as a catalyst for determining different but analogous needs in other locales.

Participants

Questionnaires were mailed to elementary and secondary special educators in all parishes (i.e., counties) of Louisiana with predominantly rural communities. Rural communities are defined as having less than 150 inhabitants per square mile; rural parishes have more than 60% of the population living in communities of less than 5,000 (Helge, 1984). A cover letter requesting responses from both administrators and teachers accompanied the questionnaire. A total of 101 special educators (n=49 special education administrators and n=52 special education teachers) responded to the survey. With the exception of one respondent, each participant was certified in mild/moderate impairments. Sixty-two of the educators had attained Master's degrees in special education. The average number of years of experience working with minority handicapped students was 8.25. Less than 12% of the participants were members of a minority group and nearly 37% were over the age of 42.

Instrument

The needs assessment instrument was developed based on a review of the current literature regarding the education of handicapped students from rural and minority backgrounds. Helge's (1983) findings concerning effective teacher preparation in rural settings were particularly important to this study in light of the

fact that a significant number of handicapped minority students in Louisiana reside in rural, poverty-strickened areas. In addition, data focusing on critical issues of the 1990s in multicultural special education provided in Information Center for Children and Youth with Handicaps (News Digest, 1987) were used. Members of Southeastern Louisiana University's Multicultural Advisory Council, the faculty in the special education department, and local special education teachers also provided information regarding training needs specific to the cultures and populations in rural Louisiana. Thus, the needs assessment addressed issues deemed as important in the implementation of appropriate teacher training as well as specific personal and professional characteristics that may be necessary for success in a pluralistic classroom in rural Louisiana.

Procedure

Participants were asked to respond to 38 statements using a four-point Likert-type scale with needs ranked from 1 (not important) to 4 (very important). The questions covered quality of preservice training, necessary competencies for effective teaching, and other factors considered important for success in the multicultural teaching environment. Items were ranked according to mean scores in order to identify the most important and least important training needs for teachers of mildly handicapped students who come from culturally and linguistically diverse populations. In this way, the priority of needs in the present study could be established and compared to results of similar studies conducted previously (Helge, 1983; Taylor, 1986; Glimps, 1985; Ward, 1971).

Results/Discussion

The results of the needs assessment are presented in Table 1. The responses by participants overwhelmingly suggested that specialized teacher training is vital for educating and retaining minority students. Although all items were rated by some educators as important, relative differences provide insight as to how these educators prioritized items based on current multicultural special education training needs. Therefore, both the five highest ranked items and the five lowest will be discussed.

Insert Table 1 here

Educators in Louisiana regarded items # 5 "Methods coursework focused on individual traits, learning styles, perceptual styles, and cognitive styles" (mean = 3.79) and #18 "Communication skills

to communicate and relate with minority children" (mean = 3.69) as the most important requisites for successful teaching in multicultural special education environments. Both literature and practical experience have continually demonstrated that cultural and linguistic variations as well as learning styles in children may influence learning and necessitate flexible approaches to teaching (Collier & Hoover, 1988; Glimps, 1985; Ward, 1971). Furthermore, these responses reiterate Taylor's (1986) recommendation that practitioners need to be trained to distinguish legitimate disorders and cultural differences. Training in these areas is likely to reduce the inappropriate referral of minority students for special education.

Results of Helge's (1983) study suggested that parental and community involvement are important to the total education of students who are culturally and linguistically diverse. The respondents of this survey shared this concern. They ranked #17 "Hands-on experiences in multicultural communities" (mean = 3.67) and #23 "Skills in working with minority parents and extended family members" (mean = 3.63) as necessary for quality preservice training. These concerns reflect the importance of familiarity and contact with the lifestyle common to the minority student. Lefley (1985) contended that teachers must have opportunities to "experience" the culture of their students through visits to communities, restaurants, churches and family homes. Likewise, these results reveal the necessity of an ecological approach to special education where informed, involved parents contribute significantly to the education of the student (Bailey & Harbin, 1980). It should be emphasized that in preparing teachers to work with minority handicapped students and their families, training regarding the types of family structures common to many culturally diverse populations (e.g., the extended family) should be included in the curriculum (Eagar, 1986; Utley & Marion, 1984). Thus, being able to implement innovative approaches which utilize a variety of family members as caregivers is an especially important consideration to the education of many minority students.

Finally, #12 knowledge of "Nonbiased testing and assessment" was cited as important to preparation for multicultural competency. Although the issue of appropriate assessment practices is relevant to all children nationwide, it is particularly important in rural Louisiana due to the state's distinct ethnic and cultural diversity. Consequently, effective teacher training should highlight the issue of appropriate assessment practices for minority students.

In light of the current literature regarding critical multicultural teacher training needs, some key items appeared to have been given low priorities by the respondents of this needs assessment. Discussion of the results of the five lowest ranked items is necessary because these rankings suggest the need to

expand the knowledge base and experiences of these and presumably other special educators across the state who will teach minority handicapped rural students. Item #24 "Skills in working with significant community members" (mean = 2.73) seemed to raise the least concern. Utilization of community leaders such as church pastors, community center directors, and local businessmen can often gap the bridge between the school and families (News Digest, 1987). However, this response by educators clearly echoes previous (Lefley, 1985) findings that teachers are not aware of the significance of encouraging every individual within the minority community to participate actively in the educational process. Moreover, the authors' previous experiences in working with minority children and families strongly suggest that such individuals come to rely heavily on their leaders to assist and guide them in decision-making. Consequently, the low ranking of item #24 may indicate the necessity of training programs to provide teachers with "real" opportunities for developing interpersonal skills which are more likely to improve outreach efforts to reintegrate the school and families and communities (Comer, 1980).

Somewhat surprisingly, item #4 "Minority special education administrators and teachers" (mean = 2.83) also ranked as less important than most other items. The lack of adequate minority representation in special education may not automatically impair teaching effectiveness. Even so, visibility and involvement of such individuals are likely to increase the probability of an appropriate education as well as provide role models to students who are culturally or linguistically diverse (Graham, 1987). Consequently, awareness of the importance of minority personnel in educating minority children may encourage efforts to train and employ significant numbers of minority group special educators and support personnel.

Item #8 "Specialized reading lists" (mean = 2.92) was not identified by respondents as very important to preservice training. This lack of concern as suggested by the present study may indicate that many special educators do not recognize the importance of understanding individual differences, particularly among culturally diverse populations. (Fuchigami, 1980; Glimps, 1985). Effective programming for handicapped minority students will require a substantial amount of knowledge and experience which can be acquired through reading and research.

Finally, items #27 "Being raised in a minority community" (mean = 3.06) and #11 "Familiarity of social goals of minority communities" (mean = 3.17) did not receive strong support. Again, these results indicate that special educators may need to be more aware of the significance of community and cultural influence on learning and behavior. Certainly, teachers need not

have been raised in a minority community or even reside in one while teaching to be effective; however, acceptance by community members and families tends to be facilitated through the willingness of educators to understand and relate to a community's culture, value systems, and strengths (Coleman & Hoffer, 1987; Lefley, 1985).

Conclusion

The need for a more pluralistic approach to teacher preparation is currently recognized in many university special education teacher training programs. Based on the responses of participants of this needs assessment, effective teacher training should integrate issues such as minority learning styles, linguistic and communication variations, behavioral characteristics, value differences, parental and community involvement, and the impact of poverty on performance in school. Given an appropriate background from knowledge-based curricula, and actual field-experiences in multicultural settings, prospective teachers are more likely to develop skills to meet the needs of all students.

Individual differences are the cornerstone of the human condition. Perhaps one key to preventing school dropouts among minority students with exceptionalities is to provide a positive and accepting climate where individual differences are recognized, discussed, and ultimately embraced. Although these differences may exist, teachers must be trained to accept cultural and/or linguistical differences as they are trained to accept cognitive or physical differences. If minority students are able to feel that their individual cultural backgrounds have a special worth, they will be more likely to succeed and less likely to reject the educational system.

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Table 1

Needs Assessment Results for 101 Louisiana Special Educators
by Percent of Response

Code: 4 = Very Important 2 = Occasionally Important
3 = Moderately Important 1 = Not Important

I. Quality of Preservice	4	3	2	1	Mean
1. Communication disorders in culturally diverse populations	40.4	46.2	11.5	1.9	3.250
2. Multicultural special education service delivery	34.6	51.9	13.5	0.0	3.212
3. Strategies for identifying available services and resources for minority group children	54.7	35.8	7.5	1.9	3.434
*4. Minority special education administrators and special education teachers	24.5	39.6	30.2	5.7	2.830
**5. Methods coursework focused on individual traits, learning styles, perceptual styles, cognitive styles	0.0	81.1	17.0	1.9	3.792
6. Generic approaches to teaching culturally and racially exceptional children	0.0	60.4	30.2	9.4	3.509
7. Effective strategies for modifying curriculums for minority group children	42.3	34.6	19.2	3.8	3.154
*8. Specialized reading lists	17.0	60.4	20.8	1.9	2.925
9. Specific customs, histories, values and cultures of minority groups	37.7	47.2	15.1	0.0	3.226
10. Student attitudes about school and themselves	67.9	18.9	13.2	0.0	3.547
*11. Social goals of minority communities	36.5	44.2	19.2	0.0	3.173
**12. Nonbiased testing and assessment	69.8	24.5	5.7	0.0	3.642
13. Teaching Standard English to non-standard English speaking children	56.9	29.4	13.7	0.0	3.431

14. Field experiences in multicultural classroom settings	67.9	26.4	5.7	0.0	3.623
15. Opportunities to observe multicultural communities	64.2	26.4	9.4	0.0	3.547
16. Simulations of problem solving in multicultural classroom	50.9	32.1	17.0	0.0	3.340
**17. Hands-on experiences in multicultural communities	73.6	20.8	5.7	0.0	3.679
**18. Communication skills to communicate and relate with minority group children	76.7	16.3	7.0	0.0	3.698
II. Competencies. Rate the importance of competence in the following areas.					
19. Understanding non-traditional behaviors, values, and learning styles	59.6	36.5	3.8	0.0	3.558
20. Understanding and respect for diverse linguistic/dialectic orientations	47.2	47.2	5.7	0.0	3.415
21. Strategies for locating appropriate teaching materials and resources for culturally different children	61.5	28.8	9.6	0.0	3.519
22. Awareness of coping skills of minority group children	60.4	30.2	9.4	0.0	3.509
**23. Skills in working with minority parents and extended family members	69.2	25.0	5.8	0.0	3.635
*24. Skills in working with significant community members	15.1	50.9	26.4	7.5	2.736
25. Working with social service agencies	34.0	56.6	7.5	1.9	3.226
26. Interpersonal skills	56.9	35.3	7.8	0.0	3.490
*27. Being raised in minority communities	25.5	54.9	19.6	0.0	3.059
28. Awareness of available community service delivery programs for culturally different children	47.1	41.2	9.8	2.0	3.3

29. Knowledge of current legislation (i.e., PL 94-142, LA 1508, PL 99-457)	57.7	25.0	17.3	0.0	3.404
30. Diagnosing and distinguishing communication disorders	51.9	34.6	13.5	0.0	3.385
31. Nondiscriminatory testing and assessment	59.6	30.8	9.6	0.0	3.500
32. Knowledge and respect of minority cultures, and value systems	53.8	36.5	7.7	1.9	3.423
33. Simplifying forms for parents	55.8	28.8	15.4	0.0	3.404
**34. Respect for minority group parents	53.8	36.5	7.7	1.9	3.423
35. Creativity and decision-making strategies	39.2	52.9	7.8	0.0	3.314
36. Working with wide diversity of handicapping conditions	63.5	28.8	7.7	0.0	3.558
37. Working with wide diversity of exceptional children	63.5	28.8	7.7	0.0	3.558
38. Adapting monocultural curriculum to a more pluralistic curriculum	42.3	51.9	5.8	0.0	3.365

* Items given lowest priority

** Items given highest priority